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Good Nutrition Starts Early

Many families busy with work, school and other activities have given up the family dinner. But recent studies show that children who eat dinner regularly with their families tend to be happier and more successful in school. Family dinners are also a good time to teach children about nutrition, which is more important now than ever before.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, there is a steady decline in the quality of children's diets. There has also been a dramatic increase in the number of overweight children in the United States in recent years. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the National Center for Health Statistics report that more than 10 percent of children ages 2 to 5 are overweight, up from 7 percent in 1994.

Experts say that for many children, being overweight is a result of unhealthy eating patterns and too little physical activity. That's why Butte County Children & Families Commission offers parents and caregivers the following tips on what they can do to help their young kids be healthy.

Parents should realize all children have different appetites and different food preferences. One child might eat a lot more than another, and your child might eat a lot one day and less the next. Research shows that children naturally eat what they need as long as they are offered healthy choices.

Toddlers and young children eat small amounts and they eat frequently, so providing regular meals and snacks is important for their health. Snacks help children get the calories and nutrients they need.

Choose healthy snacks like fresh fruits, vegetables, unsweetened cereals, tortillas, crackers, bread, cheese or yogurt. Iron and calcium are also important for young children.

Iron-rich foods include:

- Dried peas
- Dried beans
- Meat
- Enriched breads and grains
- Dry cereals that have at least 50 percent of
the Daily Value of iron added
- Dark-green leafy vegetables

Calcium-rich foods include:

- Low-fat milk products
- Lean meats
- Canned fish with bones (such as sardines and salmon)
- Beans
- Tofu
- Broccoli
- Dark-green leafy vegetables
- Calcium-enriched orange juice

Kids can be picky. They may not like mixed foods like stews or casseroles. They may not want their foods to mix or touch on their plates. They may eat a food once, but not the next time it is served. They may need to try a food several times before they like it. All of this is normal behavior for young children.

Butte County Children & Families Commission offers parents and caregivers the following tips for making mealtimes more enjoyable and healthy for families:

- Introduce a new food with one that your child already likes.
- Give fun names to foods, like “little trees” for broccoli.
- Give kids finger foods so they can be independent and practice coordination.
- Allow your child to stop eating when he is no longer hungry.
- If appropriate, let your child leave the table for another activity.
- Don’t feed toddlers and young children in front of the TV—it can make them anxious.
- Prevent choking:
 - Cut your children’s food into small pieces. Remove bones from meat, and seeds or pits from fruit.
 - Don’t give young children under three years of age whole grapes, hot dog “rounds,” meat chunks, popcorn, nuts or hard candy.
 - Make sure your child is seated when you are feeding him.
 - Don’t let your child walk around with a bottle.
 - Learn first aid for choking. **Home Heath Care Management, Inc.** is currently funded by Butte County Children & Families Commission, and offers classes for parents and caregivers on first aid for choking infants and children.

Opt for Fit Kids is a project currently funded by Butte County Children and Families Commission, which offers at no cost to families, screening, referral, and weight management nutrition services for overweight children. Opt for Fit Kids also provides workshops for preschool teachers, childcare providers, and parents to increase the quality of early care and education by supporting healthy family lifestyle behaviors.

Research shows that a child’s brain develops most dramatically in the first five years and what parents and caregivers do during these years to support their child’s growth will have a meaningful impact throughout life. Based on this research, California voters passed Proposition 10 in 1998, adding a 50 cents-per-pack tax on cigarettes to support programs for expectant parents and children ages 0 to 5. Butte

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County Children & Families Commission, also known as First 5 Butte County, distributes approximately \$2 million a year to programs and services locally. Another funding round will transpire in May 2004 to award grants to successful bidders wishing to provide services to young children and their families.

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